Cuyahoga Valley

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Cuyahoga Valley National Park

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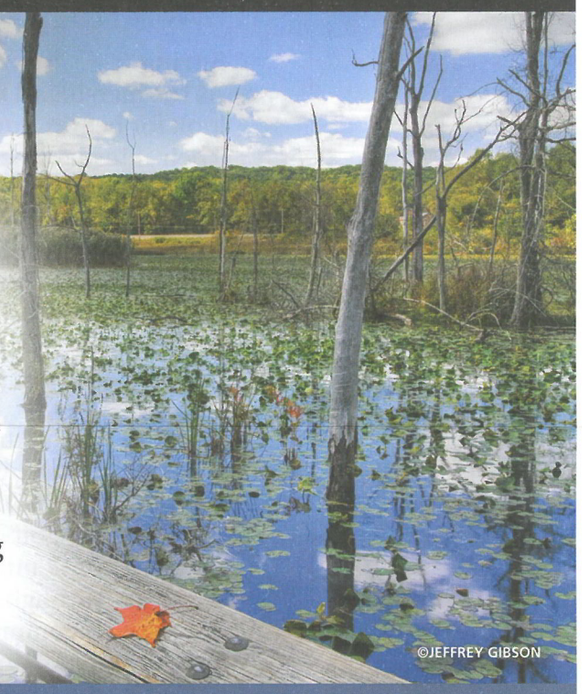
Beaver Marsh



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Throughout the year, the Beaver Marsh teams with life. Depending on the month, you may be serenaded by choirs of countless frogs, watch turtles swim among lily pads, glimpse a beaver nibbling on a willow branch, or hear northern cardinals call from snowy trees. The Beaver Marsh is among the most diverse natural communities in Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP). The exceptional scenery and wildlife make it one of the park's most popular destinations. Here you can enjoy photography, bird watching, and sharing nature with family and friends. Use this bulletin to deepen your understanding and enjoyment of this special resource.

Marshland Restoration

The auto repair shop on Riverview Road. NPS COLLECTION

Starting in the 19th century, land development drained the original wetland. The Ohio & Erie Canal came through. Darwin Carter had a dairy farm on part of the property. Just before the National Park Service purchased the land, an auto repair shop was here, surrounded by old cars and worn-out parts. During the establishment of CVNP, efforts by humans and beavers transformed this site back into a wetland.

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DEPOSITORY ITEM

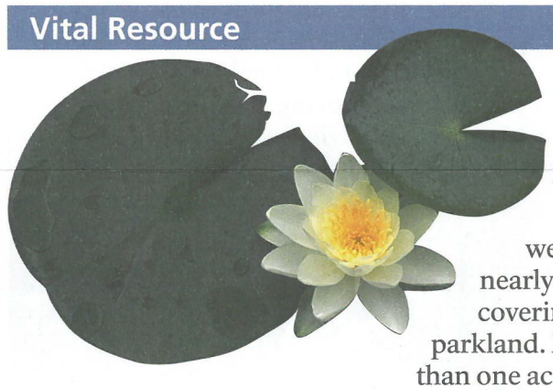
In 1984, the Portage Trail Group of the Sierra Club organized a site clean-up. Together with the National Park Service, they hauled away car parts, bed springs, and accumulated trash. Plans for the property were unresolved; the young park was considering building a parking lot here.

Beaver. ©CHERYL OSGOOD

Around the same time, beavers started returning to the valley. They had been absent from Ohio for over a century, trapped out for their fur. Beavers built a system of dams that flooded the area. By altering their environment and creating deep water, beavers can enter their lodge underwater and swim to gather building supplies and food, avoiding the dangers of land.

Humans cleaned up and preserved the land. Beavers restored natural water levels, awakening long-dormant seeds in the soil. Wetland plants returned, creating habitat for diverse wildlife.

Vital Resource



Sweet-scented water lily blooms in summer. ©BRUCE WINGES

Ohio has lost nearly 90% of its wetlands to development. Nationally, 46% of endangered or threatened species need wetlands. CVNP protects nearly 1,500 individual wetlands covering over 1,900 acres of parkland. Many of these are less than one acre. The 70-acre Beaver Marsh is significant because of its size, rich seed bed, complex water chemistry, and diversity of life.

To measure wetland health, resource managers use the Vegetation Index of Biotic Integrity (VIBI). In 2011 plant surveys revealed that some sections of the Beaver Marsh are pristine, while others are in moderate to poor condition. Scientists found highly sensitive wetland plants such as hairy fruited sedge, skunk cabbage, marsh fern, speckled alder, buttonbush, and sweet-scented water lily. In some degraded areas, invasive plants such as narrow-leaved cattail, common reed, and purple loosestrife are crowding out other species.

The VIBI plant surveys also confirmed that there are several microhabitats within the marshland, supporting distinct plant communities. This mosaic, in turn, supports a greater variety of wildlife.

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Observing Throughout the Year

The marshland boardwalk offers opportunities for watching wildlife at any time of year. Each season has its rewards.

Spring

As the marshland thaws in early spring, look for beaver during the late afternoon. Their internal clocks can be out of sync with the timing of dusk, a result of being confined to their lodge over winter. Late afternoon is also when muskrats start to appear from their cattail lodges. Muskrats are much smaller than beavers and have a more rounded head. Their tail is rat-like, not paddle-shaped.

Nesting Baltimore oriole. ©JIM SCHMIDT

Wood ducks and other waterfowl return in mid-March. A variety of songbirds stopover during peak migration from late April through May. By late May, it is common to see snapping and painted turtles basking on floating logs.

Summer

Over 40 bird species nest annually at the marsh. Early summer is the best time to observe them. Search for Baltimore oriole, tree swallow, wood duck, marsh wren, sora, and Virginia rail. Early summer is also when small beaver kits first venture out of the lodge.

An otter is a rare sight. ©PETE HENDRICKSON

In early morning, sleek otters play and groom. On sunny days, northern water snakes bask on logs along the shorelines. On warm evenings, listen for courting green frogs and bullfrogs among the water lilies. At dusk, bats dart on fluttery wings, hunting insects.

Fall

During this season, beavers store softwood branches, such as willow and aspen, in front of their lodge as a winter food supply. Look for southbound waterfowl during the fall migration which starts to peak in late October. Sometimes you can spot more than 20 wood ducks within the marsh and surrounding channels.

Wood ducks. ©CHERYL OSGOOD

Winter

By mid-December, the marsh is usually completely frozen over. Beaver mostly remain in their warm, cozy lodge, venturing out to feed on their cache of branches or on tubers of nearby water lilies. They are active throughout the winter and do not hibernate. Along the shorelines and among the cattails, search for tree sparrows, white-throated sparrows, and—if you are lucky—a swamp sparrow.

Cattails in winter. ©ED TOEREK

Visiting and Volunteering

The Beaver Marsh is located ¼ mile north of Ira Trailhead along the Towpath Trail. The easy walk is accessible by wheelchair or stroller. The Towpath Trail can be congested here. Please exercise caution by staying to the right and watching for passing cyclists. If you are out at night, wear reflective clothing and carry a flashlight.

Interested in becoming more involved in wildlife conservation? Citizen Scientists volunteer to monitor amphibians and birds at park wetlands during the spring. Wildlife Watchers assist visitors in observing wildlife at the Beaver Marsh and other locations. For information, contact the volunteer office at 330-657-2299 or volunteer@forcvnp.org.

The Beaver Marsh reminds us of what can happen when natural places are protected and natural processes are allowed to occur. However, we must remain vigilant to threats that could undermine its pristine qualities. As you enjoy the serene beauty and abundant wildlife, consider your role in ensuring that the Beaver Marsh has a bright future.

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